

Interview

“It would be tragic if Haven-Stad ends up looking like everything else.”

Arun Jain has over three decades of US and international experience in urban design and urban strategy, in practice and academia. He was Portland's first Chief Urban Designer (2003-2009) and has worked on public and private urban development projects in over 105 cities across 42 countries. A Fellow of the American Institute of Certified Planners, he was invited by the Urban Land Institute to reflect on Haven-Stad. He also spoke at and contributed to the reader of the international 'Up Close and Liveable' conference on the 22nd of June 2018 in Amsterdam. We asked him about his ideas on designing the city of tomorrow.



Arun Jain (foto via Arun Jain)

Merel Akerboom en Maarten Markus

What will the city of tomorrow look like?

“Cities are evolving (open ended) complex systems. More than any expression of a clear future-oriented vision, I see them as representations of our current perceptions of modernity, and as reflections of our historical values and inherited cultures.

Accordingly, I think some cities will be able to take better advantage of their climate, socio-political values and wealth (including human and social capital). Other cities will see huge variations in their quality of life across different segments of their citizenry. In cities where these differences are large, some groups will have all the essential comforts of a good life, while a growing percentage will struggle in the same environment for the basics. How much one or the other group prevails will depend on each city’s ability to leverage and share its resources across its unique demographic mix.

The most comfortable and liveable cities will be characterized by good social structures, the right mix of public priorities, robust and fair governance structures, and infrastructure that can maintain vibrancy, coherent identity, and character while ensuring a constantly improving average quality of life for everyone. The struggle to maintain and improve such desired conditions will be continuously challenged by an ongoing struggle for social equity, our need to adapt to big concerns like climate change, and a need to keep up with changing community values. In other words, the future of cities will be a mix of hope and future potential in the context of a deepening struggle for balance.”

What must we do to achieve a city that is as comfortable as possible?

“All the administrative functions of a city are organized to improve the qualitative aspects of the life and well-being of its citizens. We use metrics as a practical way to make these qualitative goals achievable. We make complex issues easier to deal with by breaking them down into applicable areas of expertise. In our current paradigm our solutions to complex urban issues tend to be largely managed by a

mix of dominant decision makers, expertise and vocal actors. Our ability to address complex conditions and aspirations depends on the concerns of these primary participants. Looking ahead, I see at least two major impediments to ensure the qualitative agenda of cities can be effectively sustained.

First, in a world of increasingly complex urban interdependence, it is getting harder for cities to break down their complexity into the traditional mix of city departments and sustain overall coherence. Secondly, the push towards quantification and shift to reliance on data as the primary basis for all change is likely to miss many human nuances of urban life.

For the longest time we have intuitively taken for granted how a small local business connects its community together, how neighbours connect and build self-reinforcing networks, and how the best spaces and places can adapt freely to be natural social platforms that support entire communities. However, all these valuable human interactions are being morphed by social media, the internet and digital forces. Such change compels us to pre-emptively consider which of these relationships are truly enhanced by technology and which of them are under threat. If our basis for everyday interaction is changing, it follows that our traditional ways of planning, decision making and doing must also adapt to keep up.”

How would these traditional ways of planning, decision making and doing need to change?

“Today our system of urban governance is based on siloed thinking, a separation by function (i.e. city departments), and how the professional expertise in each department is managed, financed, and its functions regulated. These barriers can be overcome when there is less territoriality between departments. It’s easier to do in smaller cities, but harder in larger bureaucracies.

One way to transcend such struggles is to create management systems in which teams manage urban

problems independent of any department. So, rather than create a new department for say, climate change, we could imagine an appropriately assembled group of multidisciplinary experts that float across existing city departments with a mandate to coordinate and manage integrated responses. These teams would need to have the authority to work strategically and bring together a wider array of people, concerns and integrated thinking that would not be otherwise possible.

This is just one of many possible ways to deal with increasingly complex and interdisciplinary challenges. Our tough reality is that it is very hard to restructure city management systems, departments, expertise to radically change how we make collective decisions. This is because we all tend to get comfortable with the systems we are in. However, without some appropriate restructuring, I worry it will get harder for most cities to keep up with the growing complexity and interconnectedness of their existing and new challenges. The clever and most adaptive cities will of course, do well."

Do cities have to go for 'learning by doing' or making big masterplans when it comes to growing complexity and the interconnectedness you described earlier?

"I prefer starting a planning and urban design process by collectively first "learning what is" while also being as clear as possible on "why" intervention is needed. Only then can we formulate good responses on what to "do." To be so deliberate can take time, but I believe we can make it efficient by creating better processes and methods that provide background data and information faster. Even if it does take longer to start up the effort, I have found that spending the extra time to rigorously work out the "why" before the "how" always results in a more robust outcome.

Over time I've found myself moving away from the concept of "Masterplans" because they tend to reflect a collection of grand ideas that in a fast-changing world, almost always become out-of-date before they can be fully implemented.

Instead, I prefer developing "frameworks" that establish good reasons for intervention, and then being very clear what must happen and why. The interventions are best worded as "performance criteria," This allows space and time for the political will and resources (money) to mature. It is important for the criteria to not prematurely convey any precise idea of what the change should look like. This is because it is human nature to base approval on images (i.e. architectural designs or rendering) and less on concepts. Over long development horizons an "image or design" that's acceptable today is increasingly likely to be out-of-date when all the related parts finally fall in place.

In other words, I believe it is a more adaptive and resilient approach to establish a collective clarity of context, need, and the performance criteria of what a desired outcome must accomplish without locking in solutions for conditions we can't imagine. *This is a more resilient and adaptive way to reduce the risks of uncertain futures.*"

What are the biggest development challenges in Haven-Stad?

"First, my greatest compliments to all involved for thinking so far in advance across such an extended development horizon.

Since we cannot reasonably predict the real estate market beyond five years I don't think it is possible to establish anything more than an approximate development program and mix for each of the twelve proposed neighborhoods now. I see the challenge as not only developing strategies for uncertain future market conditions, but also allowing enough time for necessary and time-consuming infrastructure investments to be planned and built to be ready in time for each development phase.

Thinking ahead, the city can use this uncertainty to imagine each of the twelve neighbourhoods having its own distinctive identity and character. This project also offers a truly unique opportunity to create adaptive

and integrated mobility and “soft” (or socially oriented) infrastructure. For example, we could imagine technological advances allowing a community centre to someday also function as a mini hospital, light manufacturing, learning, or perhaps even an innovation centre. Moreover, every neighbourhood does not need to have the same balance or mix of uses. Some might be more commercial, workforce, live-work or production oriented, others might stay more traditional. Allowing new technologies and preferred social norms to influence each progressive development would keep each new neighbourhood relevant and exciting.”

From an urban design and strategy perspective, how should Amsterdam plan Haven-Stad?

“My experience tells me that we are really quite poor at prediction. Yes, today we have more sophisticated simulation models, but for the complex open-ended systems cities are, I am quite certain that what we will need tomorrow is likely to be quite different from what any of us can imagine or simulate today.

Imagine old working-class neighbourhoods that have renewed popularity like Prenzlauer Berg or Neukölln in Berlin. They have withstood the test of time and retained enough of their character to be recognizable despite big changes. These areas inherited good fundamental infrastructure like the relationship between shops, streets, open space, urban form, building height, use, and related factors. All these relationships have remained strong enough to keep identity and character while the interior spaces have been upgraded to remain functional. It has been easier to retrofit these districts because of their history. In Haven-Stad creating meaningful context and a “reason to be there” will be harder to do on a largely blank site.

However, creating these very resilient and good ‘bones’ is what the new communities of Haven-Stad must achieve. Its neighbourhoods should be planned and designed to be timeless. It must have enough of the right kind of development basics to allow each part to successfully adapt and yet remain viable for a

network of great places over time. This approach would eliminate the need to predict the future, but also create a very resilient urban infrastructure for these new neighbourhoods. What we build must last a long time.

The big challenge and opportunity for Haven-Stad is then that the city needs to create a sustainable framework (social and physical) for neighbourhoods and communities, and not be too fixated on creating just a pre-determined number of homes or jobs. Yes, build in the basic infrastructure for good society, but also leave enough flexibility for the market to decide.”

Any final thoughts on Haven-Stad?

“It is very rare for a city to have so much development potential near its historic center. This makes the development site a special and challenging opportunity. The city has a lot of great instincts for Haven-Stad. But it is early enough in the process to say this is also a good time to contemplate unique, adaptive, and perhaps even radical responses to cope with an uncertain future. It is also a good time to consider how uncertainty, resilience and being aspirational might be mutually inspiring.

I can easily imagine a series of different and unique development clusters that have physically connected networks conveying the timeless impression that everything always belonged there. Each part of the development and its whole together reflecting not only a natural evolution from Amsterdam’s physical and cultural heritage, but also acting as a window into a highly aspirational, socially sensitive, and inclusive future.

It would be tragic to create a Haven-Stad that is out of sync with the Amsterdam so near and around it. But it would be just as tragic if it ended up looking like everything else.”